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For Winter Gardening Success, Know Local Weather

Success in gardening often depends upon knowing local climatic conditions, and northern Gulf Coast weather is like nowhere else in the country. We are in a unique zone - somewhere between temperate and subtropical. This location allows us to grow a wider range of plant species than just about anywhere else in the country,

According to the latest USDA Plant Hardiness Zone Map, we are in Zone 8. The southern portion of the coastal counties is in Zone 8b, with the lowest winter temperatures in the 15 to 20 degree F. range. The more northern parts of these same counties are in Zone 8a, showing past winter temperatures as low as 10 to 15 degrees.

We normally receive several brief freezes each winter. Landscapes close to the Gulf and bays are of course, warmer and experience fewer freezes. Temperatures are often 5 to 10 degrees F. higher than are found just a few miles inland.

Cold periods are brief, usually lasting no more than 2 or 3 days. Of most concern are our rapidly fluctuating winter temperatures. Winter temperatures can drop quickly following a warm period and temperate zone plants are often caught in a semi-dormant state. Some cold injury is not unusual, even on normally cold hardy species.

Some irrigation of most landscapes is needed during the winter. Extended dry periods during the colder months are not unusual.

With our unusual Gulf Coast weather in mind, following are a few winter gardening tips:

- Allow temperate zone woody shrubs to slow down and enter dormancy by withholding high nitrogen containing fertilizers.
- Irrigate landscape plantings thoroughly one to two days before a freeze is expected. Well watered ornamentals tolerate freezes much better than drought stressed plants.
- Continue planting cool season vegetables such as cabbage, broccoli, brussels

sprouts, radish, carrots, cauliflower, kohlrabi, mustard, onions and turnips.

■ This is one of the most ideal times to plant trees and shrubs. Our relatively mild winters allow for root growth, and a jump on establishment before hot weather arrives next year.

■ Prepare beds for the planting of wildflowers in early November.

■ Rake pine needles and use them as mulch in flower, shrub and vegetable beds.

■ Establish cool season annuals for winter and early spring color. Bedding plants of snapdragons, dianthus, pansies and petunias have begun arriving at local nurseries and garden centers.

■ Finish dividing and transplanting the clumping perennials such as daylilies, mondo, ajuga and liriop.

■ Locate local sources or place orders for fruit trees. Dormant trees are normally shipped during December and January for winter planting. Contact your local Extension office for a list of recommended varieties.

Question of the Week: I would like to establish sod this month (October). Is it too late in the year?

Answer: Sod can be established just about any time of the year in our location. Extra close attention to watering will be necessary because fall is typically our dry season. Even if an early cold spell brings on dormancy, continue to water periodically. Root growth, and establishment, continues through the winter because our soils are relatively warm during the fall and winter.